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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2534, TFLE01: ISRAELI ATTACKS ON NORTH COAST BRIDGE

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- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2534	2006-08-04 13:38	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Beirut

Appears in these articles:

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002534

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/04/2026
TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [PROG](#) [CASC](#) [LE](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: TFLE01: ISRAELI ATTACKS ON NORTH COAST BRIDGE

HURT EMBASSY OPERATIONS, OUR IMAGE AND EFFORTS TO ISOLATE
HIZBALLAH

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4(b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) No doubt the Israelis can provide military justification for their attacks on three bridges going north starting from the Christian port city of Jounieh this morning (8/04) and cutting off the corridor that the GOI told the world would remain open to Syria. But whatever the Israeli rationale, the severing of the main road linking Beirut with the Christian heartland of Lebanon is psychologically devastating, isolating Christian communities from one another and impeding travel to Maronite Patriarch Sfeir (in his summer residence) and Samir Ja'ja. Moreover, the attacks deal a severe blow to Embassy operations -- many of our staff (including security staff) cannot get to work, and the resupply we had anticipated to our dwindling gasoline reserves is now difficult, with impassable roads from the north and fears of further Israeli air strikes. There is a new spike in Amcits wanting our help in departure. Given that all of our assumptions about what is safe have been proven wrong, the EAC has judged that none of us can leave this compound without having coordinated all of our moves with the IDF via Embassy Tel Aviv -- a time-consuming process that prevents us from any timely, cutting-edge diplomatic efforts.

2. (C) None of our Lebanese contacts believe that these highway bridges were Hizballah targets (even if the Israelis can make that argument). For the sake of our own credibility in Lebanon, we strongly recommend that the USG use this example to put distance between us and some of the Israeli tactics in Lebanon. For the sake of our operations, we also urge an understanding with the Israelis that the greater Beirut area, through Awkar (where the Embassy is located) and Jounieh, is generally off limits to IDF strikes, with the exception of obvious Hizballah strongholds like the southern suburbs. We also urge that we get behind a high-profile initiative now -- perhaps opening a ferry link between Cyprus and Jounieh, or a limited airport link to Amman or somewhere else -- to change our image and provide psychological relief to the beleaguered Lebanese. End summary and comment.

ISRAEL TARGETS THREE COSTAL BRIDGES
IN HEART OF CHRISTIAN LEBANON

3. (SBU) Just as the morning rush hour was coming into full swing, Israel bombed three bridges on the coastal highway (Lebanon's only north-south major thoroughfare), starting on the northern side of the Christian port of Jounieh (about 10 kilometers from the Embassy) and running up through Batroun. News reports indicate that several commuters were killed and others injured. But, while the death toll is probably fairly low, the psychological blow is enormous: this was the highway that the Israelis had promised to keep open (and had highlighted in a power point distributed widely) as the lifeline through Tripoli and the Arida checkpoint to Syria. This was the road the Israelis assured people would remain open. Representatives of humanitarian relief organizations had relied on this road for getting many humanitarian supplies into Lebanon, so today's land deliveries have been halted.

4. (C) The Christian community is particular is in shock, as the Christian coastal towns of Tabarjah, Mamaltein, Ajaltoun, Jbeil (Byblos), Batroun, etc. are no longer within commuting distance of Jounieh and Beirut. Mount Lebanon no longer "feels safe," one Christian told us. Even though we believe that there are complicated, circuitous routes through wadis and ravines, and via minor side bridges, by which people can still travel between the heart of what is jokingly referred to as "Maronistan" and Beirut, people are frightened

to do so, worried about when the Israelis will take out the remaining bridges. (Over the last two days, the Israelis have destroyed even historic Ottoman bridges in the Akkar region of north Lebanon, no doubt to interrupt possible resupply routes between Syria and Hizballah.) Moreover, these side roads are hardly conducive to the type of humanitarian convoys that had been using the highway.

PATRIARCH SFEIR, SAMIR JA'JA' ISOLATED;
CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WITH HIZBALLAH ON THE RISE

BEIRUT 00002534 002 OF 003

15. (C) Travel between Beirut and Tripoli, Lebanon, s "second city" (and a major Sunni stronghold) is now difficult and time-consuming (and possible only via the minor side bridges people are now afraid to use). Residing in his Diman summer residence, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir) who has played a leadership role in getting Lebanon, s diverse religious clerics behind the Siniora cabinet and behind the idea of "equality of citizens" (euphemism for disarmament of Hizballah)) is now essentially cut off from much of his flock and from Lebanon, s political leadership. Ditto for Lebanese Forces leaders Samir Ja'ja', who plays a key role in the March 14 movement. Dismissing the logic that these essential traffic links for Christians and Sunnis could be Hizballah targets (even though, as we note, the Israelis probably can give reasons), the Christians and Sunnis who have been calling us all see this as an attack on their communities. One moderate Christian told the Ambassador that "we are all 'resistance' now."

EMBASSY OPERATIONS SERIOUSLY AFFECTED

16. (C) The Embassy has been adversely affected by these Israeli attacks in several ways. First, much of our staff -- including security staff (both ESF and bodyguards) -- cannot get to work, hindering our operations. Second, we had worked out resupply of our dwindling gasoline stocks from the north, via the now impassable road. (Ambassador Jones in Tel Aviv has agreed to help us coordinate travel along side roads, and we are exploring possibilities now. Our fuel situation is dire. We do not yet know if the tanker truck that would deliver our gasoline can travel through the narrow and winding but still passable second roads.) Third, hundreds of American citizens who heretofore had felt safe in Mount Lebanon have now decamped to our gates and have deluged our phone lines with queries about possible evacuation assistance.

17. (C) Our diplomatic initiatives are also more difficult to accomplish. While we have greatly hardened our compound and limited our moves because of possible Hizballah attacks, we operated under the assumption that the Israelis would not target the areas in which we tend to live and work) basically from West Beirut through the Maronite Christian heartland. Those assumptions were proven wrong this morning. Thus, the EAC has determined that no one can leave this compound unless we have coordinated the moves with the Israelis, a time-consuming and labor-intensive process in which we depend entirely on Embassy Tel Aviv (which has done an exemplary job of supporting our needs but probably at considerably cost to Tel Aviv, s own priorities). We are deeply concerned that no one had provided any forewarning of these unexpected attacks, nor in their aftermaths any projections about future attacks, including in Central Beirut, that could affect our operations) and our lives.

COMMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

18. (C) We emphasize that we expect that Israel will give military justification for its actions this morning, and we look forward to explanations of what seems to our military experts in the Embassy to be a pre-arranged &strike

package.⁸ But, whatever the rationale, the costs for our goals in Lebanon are quite high. Based on the hysteric reactions of our contacts and staff who suddenly feel more affected than ever by the conflict, we do not think it is an exaggeration to say that these attacks have accelerated an already losing PR battle for us here.

¶9. (C) These attacks in the Christian heartland serve to increase Christian and Sunni (because of the impact on Tripoli) sense of victimhood and have the potential to build solidarity between the Christians, Sunnis, and Hizballah. There is a certain understanding of, and even -- in some quarters *- some (quiet and, unfortunately, diminishing) enthusiasm for, Israel,s efforts in the south to root out Hizballah infrastructure. These three bridges are a whole different matter. Given that the psychological and operational blows to our goals in Lebanon are so great, we recommend that we use the bridge attacks to highlight, even if in a subtle, way, that we do not concur with all of

BEIRUT 00002534 003 OF 003

Israel,s tactics. The destruction of the bridges may provide a good opportunity for us to distinguish our policy from that of Israel, which, while sharing many similar goals, are not identical. This would help our credibility here.

¶10. (C) In light of the fact that the Israelis can probably come up with many post-facto military explanations for whatever action they deem necessary, we also hope Washington would be willing to press the Israelis on the idea of having greater Beirut (through Jounieh) being generally off limits, except for obvious Hizballah targets like the southern suburbs. This will help check dwindling Christian support for us and bolster GOL credibility. It will also allow us to focus our security concerns on Hizballah and other terrorists and enable us to continue our diplomatic initiatives without fear of being caught on the wrong side of a bridge by an Israeli strike (or on the bridge at the wrong time). For trips out of Beirut, we will continue to turn to Tel Aviv for help in coordination (and offer again our deep, sincere appreciation to Ambassador Jones and all of Embassy Tel Aviv for their ongoing efforts on our behalf). But, after this morning,s attacks, we are completely at the mercy of Embassy Tel Aviv,s ability to get some kind of green lights from the IDF, which prevents any time of quick action.

¶11. (C) Given the Israeli targeting of these bridges today, it may also be worth exploring with the GOI some of our understandings regarding potential Israeli military action. We hope, for example, that the Israeli assurances about not hitting the power plants and other essential infrastructure remain current. We hope that Washington would be willing to underscore the importance of avoiding hitting the power plants and other similar installations.

¶12. (C) Finally, we would like to make a pitch for some high-profile initiative that could be announced as soon as possible to provide psychological relief to compensate for the attacks on the bridges. Perhaps we could get behind some kind of ferry link between Jounieh port and Cyprus, or a limited airport shuttle to Amman or another city where the Israelis would have reasonable security assurances (to prevent smuggling of weapons or persons).

FELTMAN